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Senator's aide —

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good friend or bad spy?

WASHINGTON—The young man works for a senator and the older man works for the Soviet Union.

They met in restaurants in Washington's fashionable Georgetown section. The young man would give envelopes to the Soviet.

Was this a spy operation? Or just a social friendship in which one friend was giving another stuff anyone could find in any public library?

The FBI, which was watching the meetings, doesn't know. One reason it does not know is that the young American, 24-year-old John Rote, has given conflicting accounts, apparently depending on his mood.

SOMETIMES, THE Tribune has learned, Rote has confessed, even bragged, that he gave the Soviets all sorts of classified information. So some FBI agents think they have a real spy case.

But at other times, Rote has insisted that he handed over only "public information about U.S.-Soviet relations," and other agents think that his "confessions" were just posturing.

The Rote case is as politically delicate as it is confusing. The senator he works for is Lowell Weicker (R., Conn.), who is in a tough renomination battle against Prescott Bush, the vice president's brother. Vice President George Bush once served as CIA Director.

BUSH IS THE candidate of the con-

servatives, and conservatives tend to have close contacts in the intelligence agencies, putting them in a good spot to leak damaging information about folks they don't like.

So they have leaked information that Rote gave the Soviet classified material about the security system at the sensitive Rocky Flats nuclear weapons station in Colorado.

Knowledgeable sources confirmed that such information was in the files. But they are not at all certain it is accurate. These sources said John Rote is clearly arrogant and probably immature. But that does not mean he is a spy.

CONSERVATIVES IN and out of the intelligence world also want reporters to know that a former coworker of Rote's on the Weicker staff, Audrey Cole, "disappeared" after the FBI interviewed her about Rote, and that she had visited Cuba more than once and had been seen with Cuban intelligence agents.

Weicker's office said she didn't disappear. She just resigned and is on vacation in Mexico City. As to her alleged trips to Cuba and associations with Cubans, they could not be confirmed by federal authorities.

One aspect of the case that does not surprise officials is Rote's age. Joel Lisker, chief counsel of the Senate subcommittee on security and terrorism, said Soviet agents commonly seek out young and potentially naive Capitol Hill aides.

In this case, the Soviet was apparently not a spy, but a press aide reportedly nicknamed Mike, who met with Rote at restaurants called the Third Edition and the American Cafe.

IN WASHINGTON, though, it is widely believed that everyone connected with the Soviet Embassy is at least a part-time spy.

For years FBI executives have complained about Soviet agents operating on Capitol Hill attempting to wrest information from staff members by both clandestine means and open approaches.

Two years ago a former CIA officer was convicted of hiring out to the KGB and then attempting to get a job on the staffs of both the House and Senate Intelligence Committees.

FBI Director William Webster frequently complains about the Soviet network on Capitol Hill. At a recent hearing before a Judiciary subcommittee on terrorism and security, Webster identified the Soviet officials who were in the room to hear the director's presentation.

RECENTLY IT HAS become apparent that the members of the Soviet military attache office here have been particularly active on Capitol Hill.

A naval attache, Vladimir Kyasov, was discovered to have applied at the congressional General Accounting Office to receive several classified studies of weapons systems. Kyasov had applied for the studies by citing secret code numbers obtained from a yet-unknown source.

Another military operative, Boris Tatarintsev, also requested numerous General Accounting Office reports, and still other KGB and GRU (secret police and military intelligence, respectively) agents have been active on Capitol Hill.

THIS ACTIVITY has sparked a flurry of probes. Sen. Jeremiah Denton (R., Ala.) of the Judiciary Committee is conducting one; Chairman Orrin Hatch (R., Utah) of the Senate Labor Committee another; Sen. William Roth (R., Del.) a third; and the Senate Intelligence Committee a fourth.

Senate officials said that the intelligence committee is examining the Rote case.

Weicker, who has reportedly cooperated fully with the FBI, has refused to dismiss Rote. "In the absence of charges of any kind, it would be totally improper for the senator to pass judgment," said Brendan FitzSimons, his press secretary.

FitzSimons said Weicker had said, "I have not seen a classified document in my committee for a couple of years; much less in my office."